Entry type: Person
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Higgisson, Paulie

Occupation Caf?© proprietor

Summary

Paulie Higgisson is the proprietor of Canberra’s much-loved Tilley’s Devine Café.

Details

In January 1984 Paulie Higgisson opened a café in quiet, inner-suburban Lyneham which was from the beginning innovative and controversial, and became almost synonymous with live music in Canberra.

Named after the colourful Tilley Devine, Sydney's infamous madam and 'bordello queen' of the 1920s, the café was established on the corner of Wattle and Brigalow Streets. While the quirky name heralded the arrival of something a little bit different, banning groups of men drinking inside unless they were accompanied by at least one woman guaranteed a huge commotion: 'I just didn't want a room full of blokes', Higgisson told the *Canberra Times* in 2003.

Despite the uproar (generated generally by men) this door policy was maintained for two years, solidifying a non-threatening atmosphere and a considerable client base, and in the process racking up a good deal of free publicity.

Paulie Higgisson has proved to be ahead of the field in areas beyond the average cappuccino and cake venue. Tilley's has led in a field of 'firsts', as the first licensed outdoor venue in Australia and the first bar to ban smoking indoors, eight years before any laws were introduced to enforce this.

Enduringly popular, Tilley's has over the years developed a formidable reputation as a superior live music venue within the industry and the Canberra community generally, and has gained national renown. An awesome array of Australian and international artists has presented a continuous program for twenty-one years. Higgisson's policy of not serving food or drinks during performances so as not to detract from the show through the hubbub of drinking and dining marked Tilley's as a connoisseurs' choice.

While not originally conceived as a live music venue, Higgisson's skill and background as a music producer and sound engineer meant this grew almost by osmosis. As an offshoot it became a remarkably strong trump card, with Higgisson maintaining that in the last eighteen years she has never had to book a musician. Instead they have approached her for the privilege of playing at Tilley's – among them have been Mia Dyson, Lucie Thorne, Clare Bowditch, Renee Geyer, guitarists Jose Feliciano, Slava Grigoryan and Karin Schaupp, Canned Heat, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, legendary acts like the Animals, and songwriters like Jimmy Webb.

Unfortunately, this highly successful approach became a victim of its own success – 'Keeping Music Live' at least on a regular basis is now untenable. As Higgisson explained to the *Canberra Times*, 'We've had a fabulous reputation for our concerts and one of the reasons is that we keep the place pin-drop silent. It's an environment that both artists and audiences won't get anywhere else, except perhaps in a theatre. But by definition, it's financially an unproductive time for us, all in the name of the civility of the gig.'

For this reason, plus escalating overheads and the unrelenting nature of operating such a venue, Tilley's famed weekly schedule of concerts ended with the 'Last Hurrah' on Sunday 30 October 2005. The news of the demise of live music at Tilley's was greeted with dismay across Canberra and beyond.

Higgisson had decided that 'I'm not here to provide wonderful music to the public at any cost; it's not a public service. I'm just hoping that there's somebody out there with the stamina and integrity to run that kind of venue.' Nevertheless, the stage is still in place at Tilley's. Higgisson intends to stage live gigs from time to time for occasions such as the Multicultural Festival in February 2006.

This entry was prepared in 2006 by Roslyn Russell and Barbara Lemon, Museum Services, and funded by the ACT Heritage Unit.

Published resources

Article
Brief biography of Tilly Devine, The Australian War Memorial,
http://www.awm.gov.au/fiftyaustralians/15.asp

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

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